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LOVE'S FOOL

NEW AND SELECTED

POETRY BY

CHRIS HEWITT

BIG TOWN PRESS

SAN FRANCISCO 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Sacred Grounds Anthology "Midnight Serenede"

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for Richard

Evesham Station 9/9/74

I am standing on the platform.
I haven't traveled on a train
since I was a child.
I've forgotten what you do
with the luggage.
I am holding a brown leather briefcase
with my name embossed in gold letters on it.
My sister gave it to me this morning.
She cried when I went.
She is sixteen.

I check my watch with the station clock.
"Is it right?" I ask a man
in a brown suit who looks used to this kind of thing.
"Of course! It has to be!" he says.

I comb my hair—it is perfect, it is sleek—
I am new and sleek.
"Where are you off to?" a lady asks.
"Ruislip in Surrey," I say.
"That's a long way," she says.

Five minutes.
People are all around me.
They are used to this.
I check my ticket.
It is in my top pocket—
the top pocket of my jacket
which fits me perfectly.

The train is coming.
It is loud, so loud.
I have tears in my eyes.
No one is seeing me off—
we thought it best not.

I wait for some of the others to get in.
You put the luggage on the rack above the seat.
A paper.
I ought to have bought a paper.

I am sitting in the train.
I can see my face in the window.

I am on my way to Ruislip,
nothing can stop me now,
and I am perfect,
no one can fault me.
I am going down to Ruislip
and I am perfect.

On Raggedstone Hill

Hands clasp, lips touch,
and so we learn what passion is:
the losing in the thirst for dark;
the long, clear note
between the nightjar's callings;
the lure of oneness and the tremor
of ancient gongs, their echoes falling.

The barriers to love are falling away,
everything falls away
as in great illness or dying,
with only the memory of landscapes
in the ripening sun and grey gulls crying,
and moods induced by what we can't recall
surface in waves like the scent of sea breezes
over the old stone walls
and through white lilacs sighing.

Chicken Soup

(for Allan)

I am in bed with a cold.
You stop by with chicken soup:
"This'll do the trick," you say.
And because you feed it to me—
Slowly, spoon by spoon—
it is the best chicken soup in the world.
At the fourth spoon,
a noodle drops down my chin.
As you pick it out of my beard,
I lick your finger.
The next thing I know,
you have put down the soup
and we are kissing furiously.
Then we make love.
Afterwards, as you lie back
panting and laughing,
you wag a finger at me
and pretend to scold:
"Finish your chicken soup!" you say.
But by now I don't have need of it—
I am completely cured!

Addiction

In a dream endlessly,
I follow you down the rainy streets of Pisa;
You are looking for a man,
dark in a doorway waiting.
Finally you find him, light his cigarette.
The evening bell tolls
like your conscience behind you:
"No, no, no! It is your lover you want,
It is him that you love!"
But you go with the man anyway,
away into the darkness,
leaving me defeated on the corner,
an ache in my heart
the size of Tuscany.

Valentine's Day
(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Oh, it's not you I love
red-shirted one with
your obvious card, your
scentless roses and besotted
stare that bores me so; nor you
who spy at me from the sill
thinking you're next in line
when redshirt gets the boot.
My mind's a sapphire eye,
my body a strange fish
only the moon sees.
I'm a tease you say but
actually I'm shy, holding in
deliciously the preciousness
of self. For men of quietness
only–stars on water–I'll unfurl
the whole day of my heart.

What Brains Are For

Even my head is brittle—
Sometimes it feels like an egg—
Soft-boiled with a crackable shell—
a dent or two
and the brains would spill out—
my precious brains
without which I used to be nothing
but which now I use to be
other than brainy—
I can think attractive,
I can talk sexy, flashing my lovely eyes
at a man and get his number,
better still, a wink
that says "You're cute."
and he's not editing;
he means all of me.

Newly Blind

I am a man of taste and have
many lovely things around
my house. My friends would say
that all my life I've cultivated
beauty far too much—handsome friends,
dashing lovers—I sometimes think
that's why I'm doomed no more to
see. Now I have to search
for beauty that's within.
Seeing with the heart is hard.
I fear I'll never learn the art,
be confined to quick encounters,
helped and helpers. I cannot tell
if they are ugly or have charming faces,
those who guide me over crosswalks,
into elevators, down into the
subway. I cannot sense if,
could I see them, they'd be
the ones I'd trust,
though some I get to talking with,
exchanging numbers. I have to go by
timbre of voice, by delicacy
of touch.

To A Friend Who Has Not Written

It's obvious:
The mailman played a trick
And hung your letter from a tree.
I suspect you also
Of cutting your tongue
Licking the flap
Patting the mailbox
As though it were my head.

You must have some news.
I do. The asters bloomed. There's still no rain.
Oh and I go often to
A place I found
Where leaves are letters falling
All of which I've written.

How I exhaust myself
Catching them!

The Traveler

They have lost me—
Almost. They're still trying
to remember: at a party
They say, "Was he the one
With arched eyebrows, the eyes
That shone very blue..."

I moved long since to France
and Germany, past grey rivers
I went by tall grasses
Lost in clouds.

In Prague
A woman told me I was beautiful
And said she couldn't leave
Her husband's house because I
Was an idea she had when
She was very young.

I'm still here as a matter
Of fact—in Meredith, New Hampshire,
Looking out over the lake.
There's a pine tree
I visit often,
Stroke the bark.
If they must know, I still
Gulp my tea too fast and belch
After dinner and get romantic
About geraniums—the red ones
In my window-box
Above the yellow wall.

Young Men Scattering Crows

1.
In the marshland sallow with spring
crows' shadows wait
for the disturbance of young men
to scatter them like memories in air.

"Education you won't get from looking at trees,"
said our schoolmaster in the brown room.
"You young men are like a green wave
lapping at the town's shore."

2.
I arrive home,
signal the young men,
my former friends who sculpt the hedges
by the river.

In the pub they mimic me—
"In London I never drink beer"—their words
riding the night's warm breath.

3.
Under this sky that know its smallness
I close like a flower
in a garden of faces.

My mother waves.
Neighbors take cover in curtains.
Perhaps I'll find a feather
blue-black in the grass.

4.
I've forgotten the sky,
but the young men I remember—
always leafing ahead of me,
weaving through cattle,
scattering crows.

The town has a lover's reach—
its touch on the hand
I clench behind my back.

Gentleness

I disliked him from the start.
He never looked you in the eye,
screamed at the dogs
and kept moving things
my friend (his roommate) had placed
around the house with care.
He drank too much, wore
sunglasses by candlelight
and sulked. When he went
off to work, the house became
a home.

But one night
when I came back with a rose—
wrapped in tissue paper—
someone had given me for
reading my poems, and I
forgot about it because I was
weary, I went to bed and found that
he had put the rose in a crystal vase
on the bedside table and added
ferns, arranged them even. And so
I felt ashamed and thought
for everyone there should be a rose,
a rose on the bedside table,
and that small part of him
that thought to put it there was
not so small, was kindness even,
gentleness.

Purpose

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
-Henry David Thoreau

By his sprightly step and forward lean
You can tell he's going places,
the young African American man
impeccably turned out , patent leather
shoes sparkling, leather briefcase swaying.

I want to go with him
as he leaps onto the bus like a mountain goat
(must be fun to leap; can't do that
in my wheelchair)—

I want what he has—
It's not just a question of attraction,
(though he is very sexy).
You were wrong, Henry David;
it's not desperation but self-delusion
we live in, setting goals and
achieving them or not
(either way we're disappointed).

It's not this guy I want
it's his moment—when he still
has his goal, is sure he'll reach it
(and when he does, fuckin' A, he'll be all set):
I want his moment,
his sense of purpose.

Midnight Serenade

I can't sleep.
A mosquito, whining in my ear,
nips me out of a dream of you
in your silk kimono—white swan floating
on inky waters. I take my guitar
onto the terrace. I begin to serenade you
in the dark, at first softly, then louder
and louder, competing with the frogs
deep in the valley under the great pines.
By the bowl of red chrysanthemums that you love so,
I strum my lament.
I miss you so much: See, I have already broken
three strings!

(for Michael Calvert)

On Seeing Vermeer's "Officer and Laughing Girl"

I know that she let him in at the back door
that they don't have much time.
Perhaps her mother is out on an errand.
Perhaps he's been suddenly drafted.
I'm sure he's in the middle of a speech
which he's well-rehearsed:

"You're so pretty.
So alive and spirited.
I have a gift for you.
It's nothing much.
But I bought it in the Indies—
A bracelet made by a blind girl..."

Will her mother come home and surprise them?
Is he a philanderer?
Do they marry?
Is he killed in the war?

I'm glad the officer has his back to us,
remains anonymous, and that the girl is caught
forever in the delicate flush of her delicate lust,
in love and falling
for the first time.

Illustration by Lloyd Stensrud

Love's Foolishness

1.
I sit by the window in a Castro café
and watch the men passing by.
None of them, I think, is as
handsome, sexy, well-dressed, stylish,
elegant, talented, intelligent, educated
and interesting as you.
And yet,
only six months ago,
one of them was you.

2.
After we make love,
I think it will never be this good again.
And next time it is even better
and I ask you, "Is there ecstasy
beyond ecstasy?" And you turn to me
and say quite simply, "Sure, baby.
With us, anything is possible."
"You're nuts," I say.
But the next time it is better still
and I think, "Sex is definitely underrated," and I say,
"I wish I'd met you thirty years ago."
"Better late than never," you say,
And we make love until we fall asleep,
big smiles on our lips.

3.
One night you leant over and unexpectedly
kissed my ankle very softly.
It was a tender moment.
How I loved you then—a swell
of feeling making my eyes water,
my heart race.
Ever since, I've valued my right ankle
more than any other of my body parts.
By now you've kissed almost all of me.
How alive I feel, how attractive.
My friends say I just glow.
Why couldn't I feel this way
before I met you?
I was the same guy after all.
But I wasn't the same guy.

Now I wear a secret smile—
passersby recognize that on me.
I see it on some of them.
"Oh, you're just in love," says a friend, yawning.
"Really?" I say. "You really think so?"

The Lifting Team

Recently in the hospital,
and in great pain
from broken bones
after an accident,
I had to be lifted:
bed to gurney, gurney to
x-ray table (brutally hard) table to chair.

Each time they sent for the Lifting Team:
Solomon, built like a football player with
a wide smile, and Merwin, smaller, agile,
a savvy bird. Each time Solomon would say,
(seeing the tenseness of fear on my face),
"Don't worry, you'll be alright."
Indeed, their arms held me in a firm cocoon,
I never felt the slightest pain.

When in death's last delirium,
I shall call on the Lifting Team.
They will arrive as angels at my bedside,
and Solomon will say, "Don't worry, you'll be alright."
And they will halt my ghastly nose-dive into hell,
and lift me up, up, high up
into the fields of stars.

My Courage

I don't want to visit you
because your Auschwitz-inmate appearance
reminds me of my father's dying of cancer,
my grandmother's dying of starvation and old age;
because you remind me I must die one day,
even though I'm uninfected, careful, healthy,
only fifty-one;
because all I can do for you, I think,
is hold your hand;
we both know death is very grand;
but death can't stop our memories,
can't stop our love.
This is why, anyway, I walk
into your room
with my cheerful bunch of flowers,
my grapes, and all the courage I can muster.

The Roses

(for a friend stricken with depression)

You look out the window at the rain—
dark and sullen, a *wet* rain,
endless and English—
and you notice the rosebed
badly needs weeding.

In a mad fit you rush out the French windows
(without even bothering to close them)
and begin furiously to uproot dandelions,
groundsel, ragweed.

You don't care that you're getting drenched,
that your hands are cut by thorns,
and caked and sticky with soil.

Before you know it,
there's a huge pile of weeds at your side.
Finally you stand up to ease your back
and admire your handiwork.

They are so lovely, the roses,
especially now—white beacons,
white and green against the clean, dark earth.

Suddenly you notice:
it has stopped raining
and you have opened like one of them.

Dark Star

(I.M. Dave, for Steve Faringhy)

My Buddhist meditation teacher says
"Everyone's afraid of death
but there is no death."
Would he, could he have said that,
if he had seen you, my natural Buddhist,
cold in my arms, reduced from hot lava
to a slab of grey pumice?
Oh, for thirty, for five seconds of
you, flushed with life, looking into my
eyes, your lips approaching for a kiss.
I dare say the soul is immortal,
but where did you go to?
Have you become one of those myriad
dark stars in the firmament
that no one sees
because they reflect no light
and therefore shed none?
Oh for a terrestrial flashlight
that each night I could light you up with,
just to reassure myself,
just so I could say the words,
"There you are, my darling, there you are..."

Skimming

My favorite thing to do with my father on vacation
was skimming stones over the waves.
He could throw a stone so far it would become
invisible on the horizon seemingly miles away,
kissing a wave crest only a couple of times.
The trick was in the angle of the throw
like pocketing a snooker ball,
like a hole in one.

To me, skimming was his athletic prowess,
his climbing Mount Everest,
his running the Four Minute Mile,
(I was good at it, too
though I couldn't throw as far).

How fitting it was we did this—
it resembled our conversation—
always skimming the surface—
snatches of words,
never daring to speak
of my brittle bones, my tiny size,
the fact that I would never walk.

No More Monica

"We were good at movies," you said,
winking at me the night we broke up.
What you meant was, we were good at
making out at the movies—lips splishing,
tongues spiraling into each other,
helter-skelter slick. It was just
foreplay. You didn't love me. You wanted
a mistress, you married devil; I was
your Monica Lewinsky.

Now I want a man who wants to
make love in broad daylight and
all the bones about it, likes to lie
naked on a park bench, so I can
lick him all over, doesn't care who sees.
A man who says, "Let them stare. Let
them stand in line to watch like a row
of flagpoles, shaking their dismayed
red-flag faces."

I want a man who's
proud to be my lover, who can jump
on the back of my wheelchair like a
queer Charleton Heston and yell "Ben
Hur! Ben Hur! Ben Hur!" all the way
down Castro Street to the applause
of total strangers.

Timing

(In Memoriam: Ingham Sutcliffe 1884-1932)

I carry always a photo of you, in sepia tones,
squinting into the sunset,
the sad half-smile of middle age,
wearing the perpetual rose in your buttonhole.
I'm told you'd screech the bull-nosed Morris
to a halt when you spotted in the hedgerow,
with your binocular eyes, rare windflowers or bright
daffodils, or you'd leap out the car and scamper
goat-like up a hill just to pick a single orchid
or frail columbine.

You did magic tricks for children,
making toys, handkies, rabbits, appear
and disappear. You could juggle six oranges
dizzyingly fast and never drop
one, ever. A salesman all your life (a job
you hated), you sold gaudy dresses
in grimy northern towns.

You went into business on your own
but failed when the government commandeered
the buses you had bought.
You never got your wish–
to travel to New Zealand
and start a poultry farm,
somewhere in you a poet,
a book of German verse and of Dickens
always in your pockets.

Worn thin by malaria from the war
you died of pneumonia only a few years
before penicillin which (the doctor said)
could have saved you.

Because you died at forty-eight,
I never met you,
mother never took her scholarship to Oxford,
grandmother had to struggle on for forty years,
mourning secretly,
becoming bitter and too critical.

Tonight at Big Sur,
I scan the Milky Way
feel your presence,
your strong arms
surrounding my fragile bones.
I've been so lucky.

Tell me, are you the one up there,
conjuring the angels for me,
juggling the stars?

The Empty House

"Brush the leaves off your coat,"
you say, as I wait for you to
unlock the door. "Or they're bound
to find one. And let's make sure
the wheels on your wheelchair are
absolutely dry before you come in.
Otherwise they'll spot the tracks."
I'm incredulous at your fear—
you've just turned forty-three.

I wheel around their living room.
Many photos on the desk—but none
of you. Your parents are landscape painters:
well manicured pen-and-inks on the walls—
signed and titled, numbered, ready to
show. The bathroom has monogrammed
sets of towels for guests, who,
you tell me later, never come.

I feel like peeing on the carpet
or setting fire to the tablecloth.
I want to leave them a note saying,
"Notice your son? He is a kind man."

They will return in the morning from
Brazil to resume their clean lives,
surrounded by woods chaotic
from a recent storm. How, I wonder, do people
come to separate themselves like this?
After dinner we scrub, sweep and whisper
our way out of the house.

I hope I've left a track or two. Ah,
but then they'll scold you. "How dare
you bring guests here without our permission?
And no more bicycles. We could have
lent you the car—you only had to ask."

Still Breathing

Our bodies like white marble
in the moonlight:
Yours massive, muscular,
(Michelangelo would have loved to sculpt you),
mine tiny, fragile;
We both think each other beautiful
and say so.
We have just made love,
that thing men do sometimes
on a chance encounter
(maybe a date will follow, maybe not).
What matters is this moment.
We breathe in unison—
in—out—in—out—
We will remember this day
as long as we live.
Now we will have memories
such memories.
What will we do with this life
given to us so unexpectedly?
What matters is this moment;
We are still breathing:
We are the lungs of the world.
We are the voice of the world.

Illustration by Lloyd Stensrud

Love's Fool

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for Richard

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Evesham Station 9/9/74

I am standing on the platform.
I haven't traveled on a train
since I was a child.
I've forgotten what you do
with the luggage.
I am holding a brown leather briefcase
with my name embossed in gold letters on it.
My sister gave it to me this morning.
She cried when I went.
She is sixteen.

I check my watch with the station clock.
"Is it right'?" I ask a man
in a brown suit who looks used to this kind of thing.
"Of course! It has to be!" he says.

I comb my hair—it is perfect, it is sleek—
I am new and sleek.
"Where are you off to?" a lady asks.
"Ruislip in Surrey," I say.
"That's a long way," she says.

Five minutes.
People are all around me.
They are used to this.
I check my ticket.
It is in my top pocket—
the top pocket of my jacket
which fits me perfectly.

The train is coming.
It is loud, so loud.
I have tears in my eyes.
No one is seeing me off—
we thought it best not.

I wait for some of the others to get in.
You put the luggage on the rack above the seat.
A paper.
I ought to have bought a paper.

I am sitting in the train.
I can see my face in the window.

I am on my way to Ruislip,
nothing can stop me now,
and I am perfect,
no one can fault me.
I am going down to Ruislip
and I am perfect.

On Raggedstone Hill

Hands clasp, lips touch,
and so we learn what passion is:
the losing in the thirst for dark;
the long, clear note
between the nightjar's callings;
the lure of oneness and the tremor
of ancient gongs, their echoes falling.

The barriers to love are falling away,
everything falls away
as in great illness or dying,
with only the memory of landscapes
in the ripening sun and grey gulls crying,
and moods induced by what we can't recall
surface in waves like the scent of sea breezes
over the old stone walls
and through white lilacs sighing.

Chicken Soup

(for Allan)

I am in bed with a cold.
You stop by with chicken soup:
"This'll do the trick," you say.
And because you feed it to me—
Slowly, spoon by spoon—
it is the best chicken soup in the world.
At the fourth spoon,
a noodle drops down my chin.
As you pick it out of my beard,
I lick your finger.
The next thing I know,
you have put down the soup
and we are kissing furiously.
Then we make love.
Afterwards, as you lie back
panting and laughing,
you wag a finger at me
and pretend to scold:
"Finish your chicken soup!" you say.
But by now I don't have need of it—
I am completely cured!

Addiction

In a dream endlessly,
I follow you down the rainy streets of Pisa;
You are looking for a man,
dark in a doorway waiting.
Finally you find him, light his cigarette.
The evening bell tolls
like your conscience behind you:
"No, no, no! It is your lover you want,
It is him that you love!"
But you go with the man anyway,
away into the darkness,
leaving me defeated on the corner,
an ache in my heart
the size of Tuscany.

Valentine's Day
(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Oh, it's not you I love
red-shirted one with
your obvious card, your
scentless roses and besotted
stare that bores me so; nor you
who spy at me from the sill
thinking you're next in line
when redshirt gets the boot.
My mind's a sapphire eye,
my body a strange fish
only the moon sees.
I'm a tease you say but
actually I'm shy, holding in
deliciously the preciousness
of self. For men of quietness
only–stars on water–I'll unfurl
the whole day of my heart.

What Brains Are For

Even my head is brittle—
Sometimes it feels like an egg—
Soft-boiled with a crackable shell—
a dent or two
and the brains would spill out—
my precious brains
without which I used to be nothing
but which now I use to be
other than brainy—
I can think attractive,
I can talk sexy, flashing my lovely eyes
at a man and get his number,
better still, a wink
that says "You're cute."
and he's not editing;
he means all of me.

Newly Blind

I am a man of taste and have
many lovely things around
my house. My friends would say
that all my life I've cultivated
beauty far too much—handsome friends,
dashing lovers—I sometimes think
that's why I'm doomed no more to
see. Now I have to search
for beauty that's within.
Seeing with the heart is hard.
I fear I'll never learn the art,
be confined to quick encounters,
helped and helpers. I cannot tell
if they are ugly or have charming faces,
those who guide me over crosswalks,
into elevators, down into the
subway. I cannot sense if,
could I see them, they'd be
the ones I'd trust,
though some I get to talking with,
exchanging numbers. I have to go by
timbre of voice, by delicacy
of touch.

To A Friend Who Has Not Written

It's obvious:
The mailman played a trick
And hung your letter from a tree.
I suspect you also
Of cutting your tongue
Licking the flap
Patting the mailbox
As though it were my head.

You must have some news.
I do. The asters bloomed. There's still no rain.
Oh and I go often to
A place I found
Where leaves are letters falling
All of which I've written.

How I exhaust myself
Catching them!

The Traveler

They have lost me—
Almost. They're still trying
to remember: at a party
They say, "Was he the one
With arched eyebrows, the eyes
That shone very blue..."

I moved long since to France
and Germany, past grey rivers
I went by tall grasses
Lost in clouds.

In Prague
A woman told me I was beautiful
And said she couldn't leave
Her husband's house because I
Was an idea she had when
She was very young.

I'm still here as a matter
Of fact—in Meredith, New Hampshire,
Looking out over the lake.
There's a pine tree
I visit often,
Stroke the bark.
If they must know, I still
Gulp my tea too fast and belch
After dinner and get romantic
About geraniums—the red ones
In my window-box
Above the yellow wall.

Young Men Scattering Crows

1.
In the marshland sallow with spring
crows' shadows wait
for the disturbance of young men
to scatter them like memories in air.

"Education you won't get from looking at trees,"
said our schoolmaster in the brown room.
"You young men are like a green wave
lapping at the town's shore."

2.
I arrive home,
signal the young men,
my former friends who sculpt the hedges
by the river.

In the pub they mimic me—
"In London I never drink beer"—their words
riding the night's warm breath.

3.
Under this sky that know its smallness
I close like a flower
in a garden of faces.

My mother waves.
Neighbors take cover in curtains.
Perhaps I'll find a feather
blue-black in the grass.

4.
I've forgotten the sky,
but the young men I remember—
always leafing ahead of me,
weaving through cattle,
scattering crows.

The town has a lover's reach—
its touch on the hand
I clench behind my back.

Gentleness

I disliked him from the start.
He never looked you in the eye,
screamed at the dogs
and kept moving things
my friend (his roommate) had placed
around the house with care.
He drank too much, wore
sunglasses by candlelight
and sulked. When he went
off to work, the house became
a home.

But one night
when I came back with a rose—
wrapped in tissue paper—
someone had given me for
reading my poems, and I
forgot about it because I was
weary, I went to bed and found that
he had put the rose in a crystal vase
on the bedside table and added
ferns, arranged them even. And so
I felt ashamed and thought
for everyone there should be a rose,
a rose on the bedside table,
and that small part of him
that thought to put it there was
not so small, was kindness even,
gentleness.

Purpose

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
-Henry David Thoreau

By his sprightly step and forward lean
You can tell he's going places,
the young African American man
impeccably turned out, patent leather
shoes sparkling, leather briefcase swaying.

I want to go with him
as he leaps onto the bus like a mountain goat
(must be fun to leap; can't do that
in my wheelchair)—

I want what he has—
It's not just a question of attraction,
(though he is very sexy).
You were wrong, Henry David;
it's not desperation but self-delusion
we live in, setting goals and
achieving them or not
(either way we're disappointed).

It's not this guy I want
it's his moment—when he still
has his goal, is sure he'll reach it
(and when he does, fuckin' A, he'll be all set):
I want his moment,
his sense of purpose.

Midnight Serenade

I can't sleep.
A mosquito, whining in my ear,
nips me out of a dream of you
in your silk kimono—white swan floating
on inky waters. I take my guitar
onto the terrace. I begin to serenade you
in the dark, at first softly, then louder
and louder, competing with the frogs
deep in the valley under the great pines.
By the bowl of red chrysanthemums that you love so,
I strum my lament.
I miss you so much: See, I have already broken
three strings!

(for Michael Calvert)

On Seeing Vermeer's "Officer and Laughing Girl"

I know that she let him in at the back door
that they don't have much time.
Perhaps her mother is out on an errand.
Perhaps he's been suddenly drafted.
I'm sure he's in the middle of a speech
which he's well-rehearsed:

"You're so pretty.
So alive and spirited.
I have a gift for you.
It's nothing much.
But I bought it in the Indies—
A bracelet made by a blind girl..."

Will her mother come home and surprise them?
Is he a philanderer?
Do they marry?
Is he killed in the war?

I'm glad the officer has his back to us,
remains anonymous, and that the girl is caught
forever in the delicate flush of her delicate lust,
in love and falling
for the first time.

Illustration by Lloyd Stensrud

Love's Foolishness

1.
I sit by the window in a Castro café
and watch the men passing by.
None of them, I think, is as
handsome, sexy, well-dressed, stylish,
elegant, talented, intelligent, educated
and interesting as you.
And yet,
only six months ago,
one of them was you.

2.
After we make love,
I think it will never be this good again.
And next time it is even better
and I ask you, "Is there ecstasy
beyond ecstasy?" And you turn to me
and say quite simply, "Sure, baby.
With us, anything is possible."
"You're nuts," I say.
But the next time it is better still
and I think, "Sex is definitely underrated," and I say,
"I wish I'd met you thirty years ago."
"Better late than never," you say,
And we make love until we fall asleep,
big smiles on our lips.

3.
One night you leant over and unexpectedly
kissed my ankle very softly.
It was a tender moment.
How I loved you then—a swell
of feeling making my eyes water,
my heart race.
Ever since, I've valued my right ankle
more than any other of my body parts.
By now you've kissed almost all of me.
How alive I feel, how attractive.
My friends say I just glow.
Why couldn't I feel this way
before I met you?
I was the same guy after all.
But I wasn't the same guy.

Now I wear a secret smile—
passersby recognize that on me.
I see it on some of them.
"Oh, you're just in love," says a friend, yawning.
"Really?" I say. "You really think so?"

The Lifting Team

Recently in the hospital,
and in great pain
from broken bones
after an accident,
I had to be lifted:
bed to gurney, gurney to
x-ray table (brutally hard) table to chair.

Each time they sent for the Lifting Team:
Solomon, built like a football player with
a wide smile, and Merwin, smaller, agile,
a savvy bird. Each time Solomon would say,
(seeing the tenseness of fear on my face),
"Don't worry, you'll be alright."
Indeed, their arms held me in a firm cocoon,
I never felt the slightest pain.

When in death's last delirium,
I shall call on the Lifting Team.
They will arrive as angels at my bedside,
and Solomon will say, "Don't worry, you'll be alright."
And they will halt my ghastly nose-dive into hell,
and lift me up, up, high up
into the fields of stars.

My Courage

I don't want to visit you
because your Auschwitz-inmate appearance
reminds me of my father's dying of cancer,
my grandmother's dying of starvation and old age;
because you remind me I must die one day,
even though I'm uninfected, careful, healthy,
only fifty-one;
because all I can do for you, I think,
is hold your hand;
we both know death is very grand;
but death can't stop our memories,
can't stop our love.
This is why, anyway, I walk
into your room
with my cheerful bunch of flowers,
my grapes, and all the courage I can muster.

The Roses

(for a friend stricken with depression)

You look out the window at the rain—
dark and sullen, a *wet* rain,
endless and English—
and you notice the rosebed
badly needs weeding.

In a mad fit you rush out the French windows
(without even bothering to close them)
and begin furiously to uproot dandelions,
groundsel, ragweed.

You don't care that you're getting drenched,
that your hands are cut by thorns,
and caked and sticky with soil.

Before you know it,
there's a huge pile of weeds at your side.
Finally you stand up to ease your back
and admire your handiwork.

They are so lovely, the roses,
especially now—white beacons,
white and green against the clean, dark earth.

Suddenly you notice:
it has stopped raining
and you have opened like one of them.

Dark Star

(I.M. Dave, for Steve Faringhy)

My Buddhist meditation teacher says
"Everyone's afraid of death
but there is no death."
Would he, could he have said that,
if he had seen you, my natural Buddhist,
cold in my arms, reduced from hot lava
to a slab of grey pumice?
Oh, for thirty, for five seconds of
you, flushed with life, looking into my
eyes, your lips approaching for a kiss.
I dare say the soul is immortal,
but where did you go to?
Have you become one of those myriad
dark stars in the firmament
that no one sees
because they reflect no light
and therefore shed none?
Oh for a terrestrial flashlight
that each night I could light you up with,
just to reassure myself,
just so I could say the words,
"There you are, my darling, there you are..."

Skimming

My favorite thing to do with my father on vacation
was skimming stones over the waves.
He could throw a stone so far it would become
invisible on the horizon seemingly miles away,
kissing a wave crest only a couple of times.
The trick was in the angle of the throw
like pocketing a snooker ball,
like a hole in one.

To me, skimming was his athletic prowess,
his climbing Mount Everest,
his running the Four Minute Mile,
(I was good at it, too
though I couldn't throw as far).

How fitting it was we did this—
it resembled our conversation—
always skimming the surface—
snatches of words,
never daring to speak
of my brittle bones, my tiny size,
the fact that I would never walk.

No More Monica

"We were good at movies," you said,
winking at me the night we broke up.
What you meant was, we were good at
making out at the movies—lips splishing,
tongues spiraling into each other,
helter-skelter slick. It was just
foreplay. You didn't love me. You wanted
a mistress, you married devil; I was
your Monica Lewinsky.

Now I want a man who wants to
make love in broad daylight and
all the bones about it, likes to lie
naked on a park bench, so I can
lick him all over, doesn't care who sees.
A man who says, "Let them stare. Let
them stand in line to watch like a row
of flagpoles, shaking their dismayed
red-flag faces."

I want a man who's
proud to be my lover, who can jump
on the back of my wheelchair like a
queer Charleton Heston and yell "Ben
Hur! Ben Hur! Ben Hur!" all the way
down Castro Street to the applause
of total strangers.

Timing

(In Memoriam: Ingham Sutcliffe 1884-1932)

I carry always a photo of you, in sepia tones,
squinting into the sunset,
the sad half-smile of middle age,
wearing the perpetual rose in your buttonhole.
I'm told you'd screech the bull-nosed Morris
to a halt when you spotted in the hedgerow,
with your binocular eyes, rare windflowers or bright
daffodils, or you'd leap out the car and scamper
goat-like up a hill just to pick a single orchid
or frail columbine.

You did magic tricks for children,
making toys, handkies, rabbits, appear
and disappear. You could juggle six oranges
dizzyingly fast and never drop
one, ever. A salesman all your life (a job
you hated), you sold gaudy dresses
in grimy northern towns.

You went into business on your own
but failed when the government commandeered
the buses you had bought.
You never got your wish–
to travel to New Zealand
and start a poultry farm,
somewhere in you a poet,
a book of German verse and of Dickens
always in your pockets.

Worn thin by malaria from the war
you died of pneumonia only a few years
before penicillin which (the doctor said)
could have saved you.

Because you died at forty-eight,
I never met you,
mother never took her scholarship to Oxford,
grandmother had to struggle on for forty years,
mourning secretly,
becoming bitter and too critical.

Tonight at Big Sur,
I scan the Milky Way
feel your presence,
your strong arms
surrounding my fragile bones.
I've been so lucky.

Tell me, are you the one up there,
conjuring the angels for me,
juggling the stars?

"Brush the leaves off your coat,"
you say, as I wait for you to
unlock the door. "Or they're bound
to find one. And let's make sure
the wheels on your wheelchair are
absolutely dry before you come in.
Otherwise they'll spot the tracks."
I'm incredulous at your fear—
you've just turned forty-three.

I wheel around their living room.
Many photos on the desk—but none
of you. Your parents are landscape painters:
well manicured pen-and-inks on the walls—
signed and titled, numbered, ready to
show. The bathroom has monogrammed
sets of towels for guests, who,
you tell me later, never come.

I feel like peeing on the carpet
or setting fire to the tablecloth.
I want to leave them a note saying,
"Notice your son? He is a kind man."

They will return in the morning from
Brazil to resume their clean lives,
surrounded by woods chaotic
from a recent storm. How, I wonder, do people
come to separate themselves like this?
After dinner we scrub, sweep and whisper
our way out of the house.

I hope I've left a track or two. Ah,
but then they'll scold you. "How dare
you bring guests here without our permission?
And no more bicycles. We could have
lent you the car—you only had to ask."

Still Breathing

Our bodies like white marble
in the moonlight:
Yours massive, muscular,
(Michelangelo would have loved to sculpt you),
mine tiny, fragile;
We both think each other beautiful
and say so.
We have just made love,
that thing men do sometimes
on a chance encounter
(maybe a date will follow, maybe not).
What matters is this moment.
We breathe in unison—
in—out—in—out—
We will remember this day
as long as we live.
Now we will have memories
such memories.
What will we do with this life
given to us so unexpectedly?
What matters is this moment;
We are still breathing:
We are the lungs of the world.
We are the voice of the world.

Chris Hewitt emigrated from England to the United States in 1974. He has published two previous chapbooks and his poems and translations have appeared in *The New Yorker, The Advocate,* and *American Poetry Review*. He is currently senior literary editor of *A & U Magazine*. He is working on a memoir, *Brittle Bones*, which reflects his experience living with osteogensis imperfecta.

"Chris Hewitt's poems are stimulating, elegant and beautiful."

—EUDORA WELTY

"The only thing better than reading these poems is hearing Chris Hewitt read them himself —they are realistic, wise, and joyful."

—EDWARD FIELD

LOVE'S FOOL
Lyrics From A Gay Life

Poems by
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To
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Bent: "The Lifting Team," "Love's Foolishness," "No More Monica," "Skimming," "What Brains are For";

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Cimarron Review: "Newly Bind";

The James White Review: "Addiction," "On Raggedstone Hill," "Timing";

Kaleidoscope: "The Empty House," "On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl'";

Laurel Review: "Valentine's Day";

Loon: "Young Men Scattering Crows";

The New York Native: "Chicken Soup," "Gentleness," "Midnight Serenade";

Pivot: "To a Friend Who Has Not Written";

Oberon Review: "The Roses."

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The Iowa Blue Review: "Adoption," "On Begging the Hill," "Hiring":

Kalliope: "The Empty House," "On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl'":

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Evesham Station 9/9/74

I am standing on the platform.
I haven't traveled on a train
since l was a child.
I've forgotten what you do
with the luggage.
I am holding a brown leather brief case
with my name embossed in gold letters on it.
My sister gave it to me this morning.
She cried when l went.
She is sixteen.

I check my watch with the station clock.
"Is it right'?" I ask a man
in a brown suit who looks used to this kind of thing.
"Of course! It has to be!" he says.

I comb my hair—it is perfect, it is sleek—
I am new and sleek.
"Where are you off to?" a lady asks.
"Ruislip in Surrey," I say.
"That's a long way," she says.

Five minutes.
People are all around me.
They are used to this.
I check my ticket.
It is in my top pocket—
the top pocket of my jacket
which fits me perfectly.

The train is coming.
It is loud, so loud.
I have tears in my eyes.
No one is seeing me off—
we thought it best not.

I wait for some of the others to get in.
You put the luggage on the rack above the seat.
A paper.
I ought to have bought a paper.

I am sitting in the train.
I can see my face in the window.

EVESHAM STATION 9/9/74

I am on my way to Ruislip,
nothing can stop me now,
and I am perfect,
no one can fault me.
I am going down to Ruislip
and I am perfect.

I am on my way to Ramsbip,
nothing can stop me now,
and I am perfect,
no one can fault me.
I am going down to Ramsbip
and I am perfect.

On Raggedstone Hill

Hands clasp, lips touch,
and so we learn what passion is:
the losing in the thirst for dark;
the long, clear note
between the nightjar's callings;
the lure of oneness and the tremor
of ancient gongs, their echoes falling.

The barriers to love are falling away,
everything falls away
as in great illness or dying,
with only the memory of landscapes
in the ripening sun and grey gulls crying,
and moods induced by what we can't recall
surface in waves like the scent of sea breezes
over the old stone walls
and through white lilacs sighing.

Chicken Soup
(for Allan)

I am in bed with a cold.
You stop by with chicken soup:
"This'll do the trick," you say.
And because you feed it to me—
Slowly, spoon by spoon—
it is the best chicken soup in the world.
At the fourth spoon,
a noodle drops down my chin.
As you pick it out of my beard,
I lick your finger.
The next thing I know,
you have put down the soup
and we are kissing furiously.
Then we make love.
Afterwards, as you lie back
panting and laughing,
you wag a finger at me
and pretend to scold:
"Finish your chicken soup!" you say.
But by now I don't have need of it—
I am completely cured!

CHICKEN SOUP

(for Allen)

ADDICTION

In a dream endlessly,
I follow you down the rainy streets of Pisa;
You are looking for a man,
dark in a doorway waiting.
Finally you find him, light his cigarette.
The evening bell tolls
like you conscience behind you:
"No, no, no! It is your lover you want,
It is him that you love!"
But you go with the man anyway,
away into the darkness,
leaving me defeated on the corner,
an ache in my heart
the size of Tuscany

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the size of Tuscany

VALENTINE'S DAY
(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Oh, it's not you I love
red-shirted one with
your obvious card, your
scentless roses and besotted
stare that bores me so; nor you
who spy at me from the sill
thinking you're next in line
when redshirt gets the boot.
My mind's a sapphire eye,
my body a strange fish
only the moon sees.
I'm a tease you say but
actually I'm shy, holding in
deliciously the preciousness
of self. For men of quietness
only–stars on water–I'll unfurl
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Even my head is brittle—
Sometimes it feels like an egg—
Soft-boiled with a crackable shell—
a dent or two
and the brains would spill out—
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without which I used to be nothing
but which now I use to be
other than brainy—
I can think attractive,
I can talk sexy, flashing my lovely eyes
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that says "You're cute."
and he's not editing;
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I am a man of taste and have
many lovely things around
my house. My friends would say
that all my life I've cultivated
beauty far too much—handsome friends,
dashing lovers—I sometimes think
that's why I'm doomed no more to
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I fear I'll never learn the art,
be confined to quick encounters,
helped and helpers. I cannot tell
if they are ugly or have charming faces,
those who guide me over crosswalks,
into elevators, down into the
subway. I cannot sense if,
could I see them, they'd be
the ones I'd trust,
though some I get to talking with,
exchanging numbers. I have to go by
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NEWLY BLIND

To A Friend Who Has Not Written

It's obvious:
The mailman played a trick
And hung your letter from a tree.
I suspect you also
Of cutting your tongue
Licking the flap
Patting the mailbox
As though it were my head.

You must have some news.
I do. The asters bloomed. There's still no rain.
Oh and I go often to
A place I found
Where leaves are letters falling
All of which I've written.

How l exhaust myself
Catching them!

The Traveler

They have lost me—
Almost. They're still trying
to remember: at a party
They say, "Was he the one
With arched eyebrows, the eyes
That shone very blue..."

I moved long since to France
and Germany, past grey rivers
I went by tall grasses
Lost in clouds.

In Prague
A woman told me I was beautiful
And said she couldn't leave
Her husband's house because I
Was an idea she had when
She was very young.

I'm still here as a matter
Of fact—in Meredith, New Hampshire,
Looking out over the lake.
There's a pine tree
I visit often,
Stroke the bark.
If they must know, I still
Gulp my tea too fast and belch
After dinner and get romantic
About geraniums—the red ones
In my window-box
Above the yellow wall.

THE TRAVELER

Young Men Scattering Crows

1.
In the marshland sallow with spring
crows' shadows wait
for the disturbance of young men
to scatter them like memories in air.

"Education you won't get from looking at trees,"
said our schoolmaster in the brown room.
"You young men are like a green wave
lapping at the town's shore."

2.
I arrive home,
signal the young men,
my former friends who sculpt the hedges
by the river.

In the pub they mimic me—
"In London I never drink beer"—their words
riding the night's warm breath.

3.
Under this sky that know its smallness
I close like a flower
in a garden of faces.

My mother waves.
Neighbors take cover in curtains.
Perhaps I'll find a feather
blue-black in the grass.

4.
I've forgotten the sky,
but the young men I remember-
always leafing ahead of me,
weaving through cattle,
scattering crows.

The town has a lover's reach—
its touch on the hand
I clench behind my back.

Gentleness

I disliked him from the start.
He never looked you in the eye,
screamed at the dogs
and kept moving things
my friend (his roommate) had placed
around the house with care.
He drank too much, wore
sunglasses by candlelight
and sulked. When he went
off to work, the house became
a home.

But one night
when I came back with a rose—
wrapped in tissue paper—
someone had given me for
reading my poems, and I
forgot about it because I was
weary, I went to bed and found that
he had put the rose in a crystal vase
on the bedside table and added
ferns, arranged them even. And so
I felt ashamed and thought
for everyone there should be a rose,
a rose on the bedside table,
and that small part of him
that thought to put it there was
not so small, was kindness even,
gentleness.

GENTLENESS

PURPOSE

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
-Henry David Thoreau

By his sprightly step and forward lean
You can tell he's going places,
the young African American man
impeccably turned out , patent leather
shoes sparkling, leather briefcase swaying.

I want to go with him
as he leaps onto the bus like a mountain goat
(must be fun to leap; can't do that
in my wheelchair)—

I want what he has—
It's not just a question of attraction.
(though he is very sexy).
You were wrong, Henry David;
it's not desperation but self-delusion
we live in, setting goals and
achieving them or not
(either way we're disappointed).

It's not this guy I want
it's his moment—when he still
has his goal, is sure he'll reach it
(and when he does, fuckin' A, he'll be all set):
I want his moment,
his sense of purpose.

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Midnight Serenade

I can't sleep.
A mosquito, whining in my ear,
nips me out of a dream of you
in your silk kimono—white swan floating
on inky waters. I take my guitar
onto the terrace. I begin to serenade you
in the dark, at first softly, then louder
and louder, competing with the frogs
deep in the valley under the great pines.
By the bowl of red chrysanthemums that you love so,
I strum my lament.
I miss you so much: See, I have already broken
three strings!

On Seeing Vermeer's "Officer and Laughing Girl"

I know that she let him in at the back door
that they don't have much time.
Perhaps her mother is out on an errand.
Perhaps he's been suddenly drafted.
I'm sure he's in the middle of a speech
which he's well-rehearsed:

"You're so pretty.
So alive and spirited.
I have a gift for you.
It's nothing much.
But I bought it in the Indies—
A bracelet made by a blind girl..."

Will her mother come home and surprise them?
Is he a philanderer?
Do they marry?
Is he killed in the war?

I'm glad the officer has his back to us,
remains anonymous, and that the girl is caught
forever in the delicate flush of her delicate lust,
in love and falling
for the first time.

Love's Foolishness

1.
I sit by the window in a Castro café
and watch the men passing by.
None of them, I think, is as
handsome, sexy, well-dressed, stylish,
elegant, talented, intelligent, educated
and interesting as you.
And yet,
only six months ago,
one of them was you.

2.
After we make love,
I think it will never be this good again.
And next time it is even better
and I ask you, "Is there ecstasy
beyond ecstasy?" And you turn to me
and say quite simply, "Sure, baby.
With us, anything is possible."
"You're nuts," I say.
But the next time it is better still
and I think, "Sex is definitely underrated," and I say,
"I wish I'd met you thirty years ago."
"Better late than never," you say,
And we make love until we fall asleep,
big smiles on our lips.

3.
One night you leant over and unexpectedly
kissed my ankle very softly.
It was a tender moment.
How I loved you then—a swell
of feeling making my eyes water,
my heart race.
Ever since, I've valued my right ankle
more than any other of my body parts.
By now you've kissed almost all of me.
How alive I feel, how attractive.
My friends say I just glow.
Why couldn't I feel this way
before I met you?
I was the same guy after all.
But I wasn't the same guy.

Now I wear a secret smile—
passersby recognize that on me.
I see it on some of them.
"Oh, you're just in love," says a friend, yawning.
"Really?" I say. "You really think so?"

The Lifting Team

Recently in the hospital,
and in great pain
from broken bones
after an accident,
I had to be lifted:
bed to gurney, gurney to
x-ray table (brutally hard) table to chair.

Each time they sent for the Lifting Team:
Solomon, built like a football-player with
a wide smile, and Merwin, smaller, agile,
a savvy bird. Each time Solomon would say,
(seeing the tenseness of fear on my face),
"Don't worry, you'll be alright."
Indeed, their arms held me in a firm cocoon,
I never felt the slightest pain.

When in death's last delirium,
I shall call on the Lifting Team.
They will arrive as angels at my bedside,
and Solomon will say, "Don't worry, you'll be alright."
And they will halt my ghastly nose-dive into hell,
and lift me up, up, high up
into the fields of stars.

My Courage

I don't want to visit you
because your Auschwitz-inmate appearance
reminds me of my father dying of cancer,
my grandmother's dying of starvation and old age;
because you remind me I must die one day,
even though I'm negative, careful, healthy,
only fifty-one;
because all I can do for you, I think,
is hold your hand;
we both know death is very grand;
but death can't stop our memories,
can't stop our love.
This is why, anyway, I walk
into your room
with my cheerful bunch of flowers,
my grapes, and all the courage I can muster.

MY COURAGE

THE ROSES
(for a friend stricken with depression)

You look out the window at the rain—
dark and sullen, a *wet* rain,
endless and English—
and you notice the rosebed
badly needs weeding.

In a mad fit you rush out the French windows
(without even bothering to close them)
and begin furiously to uproot dandelions,
groundsel, ragweed.

You don't care that you're getting drenched,
that your hands are cut by thorns,
and caked and sticky with soil.

Before you know it,
there's a huge pile of weeds at your side.
Finally you stand up to ease your back
and admire your handiwork.

They are so lovely, the roses,
especially now—white beacons,
white and green against the clean, dark earth.

Suddenly you notice:
it has stopped raining
and you have opened like one of them.

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Dark Star
(I.M. Dave, for Steve Faringhy)

My Buddhist meditation teacher says
"Everyone's afraid of death
but there is no death."
Would he, could he have said that,
if he had seen you, my natural Buddhist,
cold in my arms, reduced from hot lava
to a slab of grey pumice?
Oh, for thirty, for five seconds of
you, flushed with life, looking into my
eyes, your lips approaching for a kiss.
I dare say the soul is immortal,
but where did you go to?
Have you become one of those myriad
dark stars in the firmament
that no one sees
because they reflect no light
and therefore shed none?
Oh for a terrestrial flashlight
that each night I could light you up with,
just to reassure myself,
just so I could say the words,
"There you are, my darling, there you are..."

SKIMMING

My favorite thing to do with my father on vacation
was skimming stones over the waves.
He could throw a stone so far it would become
invisible on the horizon seemingly miles away,
kissing a wave crest only a couple of times.
The trick was in the angle of the throw
like pocketing a snooker ball,
like a hole in one.

To me, skimming was his athletic prowess,
his climbing Mount Everest,
his running the Four Minute Mile,
(I was good at it, too
though I couldn't throw as far).

How fitting it was we did this—
it resembled our conversation—
always skimming the surface—
snatches of words,
never daring to speak
of my brittle bones, my tiny size,
the fact that I would never walk.

No More Monica

"We were good at movies," you said,
winking at me the night we broke up.
What you meant was, we were good at
making out at the movies—lips splishing,
tongues spiraling into each other,
helter-skelter slick. It was just
foreplay. You didn't love me. You wanted
a mistress, you married devil; I was
your Monica Lewinsky.

Now I want a man who wants to
make love in broad daylight and
all the bones about it, likes to lie
naked on a park bench, so I can
lick him all over, doesn't care who sees.
A man who says, "Let them stare. Let
them stand in line to watch like a row
of flagpoles, shaking their dismayed
red-flag faces."

I want a man who's
proud to be my lover, who can jump
on the back of my wheelchair like a
queer Charleton Heston and yell "Ben
Hur! Ben Hur! Ben Hur!" all the way
down Castro Street to the applause
of total strangers.

NO MORE MONICA

TIMING

(In Memoriam: Ingham Sutcliffe 1884-1932)

I carry always a photo of you, in sepia tones,
squinting into the sunset,
the sad half-smile of middle age,
wearing the perpetual rose in your buttonhole.
I'm told you'd screech the bull-nosed Morris
to a halt when you spotted in the hedgerow,
with your binocular eyes, rare windflowers or bright
daffodils, or you'd leap out the car and scamper
goat-like up a hill just to pick a single orchid
or frail columbine.

You did magic tricks for children,
making toys, handkies, rabbits, appear
and disappear. You could juggle six oranges
dizzyingly fast and never drop
one, ever. A salesman all your life (a job
you hated), you sold gaudy dresses
in grimy northern towns.

You went into business on your own
but failed when the government commandeered
the buses you had bought.
You never got your wish–
to travel to New Zealand
and start a poultry farm,
somewhere in you a poet,
a book of German verse and of Dickens
always in your pockets.

Worn thin by malaria from the war
you died of pneumonia only a few years
before penicillin which (the doctor said)
could have saved you.

Because you died at forty-eight,
I never met you,
mother never took her scholarship to Oxford,
grandmother had to struggle on for forty years,
mourning secretly,
becoming bitter and too critical.

Tonight at Big Sur,
I scan the Milky Way
feel your presence,
your strong arms
surrounding my fragile bones.
I've been so lucky.

Tell me, are you the one up there,
conjuring the angels for me,
juggling the stars?

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The Empty House

"Brush the leaves off your coat,"
you say, as I wait for you to
unlock the door. "Or they're bound
to find one. And let's make sure
the wheels on your wheelchair are
absolutely dry before you come in.
Otherwise they'll spot the tracks."
I'm incredulous at your fear—
you've just turned forty-three.

I wheel around their living room.
Many photos on the desk—but none
of you. Your parents are landscape painters:
well manicured pen-and-inks on the walls—
signed and titled, numbered, ready to
show. The bathroom has monogrammed
sets of towels for guests, who,
you tell me later, never come.

I feel like peeing on the carpet
or setting fire to the tablecloth.
I want to leave them a note saying,
"Notice your son? He is a kind man."

They will return in the morning from
Brazil to resume their clean lives,
surrounded by woods chaotic
from a recent storm. How, I wonder, do people
come to separate themselves like this?
After dinner we scrub, sweep and whisper
our way out of the house.

I hope I've left a track or two. Ah,
but then they'll scold you. "How dare
you bring guests here without our permission?
And no more bicycles. We could have
lent you the car—you only had to ask."

Still Breathing

Our bodies like white marble
in the moonlight:
Yours massive, muscular,
(Michelangelo would have loved to sculpt you),
mine tiny, fragile;
We both think each other beautiful
and say so.
We have just made love,
that thing men do sometimes
on a chance encounter
(maybe a date will follow, maybe not).
What matters is this moment.
We breathe in unison—
in—out—in—out—
We will remember this day
as long as we live.
Now we will have memories
such memories.
What will we do with this life
given to us so unexpectedly?
What matters is this moment;
We are still breathing:
We are the lungs of the world.
We are the voice of the world.

STILL BREATHING

Biographical Note

CHRIS HEWITT emigrated from England to the United States in 1974. He has published two previous chapbooks. His poems and translations have appeared in *The New Yorker, The Advocate*, and *American Poetry Review*. He is currently senior literary editor of *A & U Magazine*. He is working on a memoir, *Brittle Bones*, which reflects his experience living with osteogenesis imperfecta.

GLC 67
Hewitt

Love's Fool, 2002, undated

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